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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON ESTONIA'S SCHOOL REFORM

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¶1. (U) Summary: In September 2007 Estonia's 63 Russian language high schools will begin a gradual four-year transition to teaching 60% of the curriculum in Estonian (reftels). The GOE is slowly responding to criticism that preparations have been insufficient and a National Action Plan was adopted in March. Russian-speaking parents seem less concerned about the increase in instruction in Estonian than they are about the impact of the reform on the quality of instruction. With parliamentary elections scheduled for early 2007 we expect efforts to politicize the reform to intensify over the coming year. End summary.

The Need for Reform

¶2. (U) The GOE's National Action Plan (NAP), adopted in March 2006, affirms that 60 per cent of subjects in Estonia's Russian-language high schools should be taught in Estonian. The beginning of the 2007 school year will mark the start of instruction of Estonian Literature in Estonian. Civics (2008), Music and Art History (2009), Geography (2010), and Estonian History (2011) will follow. The NAP outlines the principles of the reform and has allotted 70 million Estonian kroons (roughly USD 5 million) for implementation. According to the NAP, the bulk of the money will be spent on retraining teachers and school leaders, creating a teacher incentive program, updating teaching materials for native Russian-speakers, and for awareness and NAP coordination and evaluation activities.

Major Concerns about the Reform

¶3. (U) According to Ministry of Education and GOE Integration Foundation officials the level of preparedness for the reform varies among the 63 schools affected. About twenty already have considerable Estonian language immersion or other intensive language instruction; another twenty are more or less ready for the reform; and the last twenty will require considerable support and counseling from the state.

¶4. (U) Although critics say the MOE has gotten off to a slow start, MOE officials are clearly sensitive to the need to reach out to students, teachers, and the Russian community in general. Minister of Education Mailis Reps regularly speaks to the press and has penned articles for the national media to explain the reform; a new department, headed by a native Russian-speaker, has been established within the Ministry with responsibility for carrying out the reform; and a nationwide series of

consultations has been organized to explain the changes to parents, teachers and other stakeholders.

15. (SBU) But in recent conversations representatives from both the Non-Estonians? Integration Foundation (NEIF) and the office of the Minister for Population and Ethnic Affairs told us they were concerned by the slow start and lack of an outreach game plan. NEIF Director Tanel Matlik told us that his organization has only now been given an EEK 8.5 million (USD 650,000) contract (that will run from April 2006 through summer 2008) for teacher preparation and other steps in support of the reform. Matlik said preparatory steps would be three-tiered: 1) teacher retraining and didactics; 2) preparation of counselors who will work in each school on reform implementation and monitoring of classroom instruction for quality; and 3) an information campaign for parents.

16. (SBU) Minister of Population Affairs (MPA) advisor Aarne Veedla told us he too believes the MOE has been slow, and stressed the need for establishing a social support program for teachers who will be affected by the reform. Veedla also underscored the importance of ensuring the quality of education that Russian speakers will receive in Estonian. The NEIF's Matlik said his organization's polling data indicate that quality -- rather than language -- of instruction is the top concern of Russian-speaking parents.

17. (SBU) While both Veedla and Matlik say outreach to parents has been lacking, there is evidence that GOE institutions are beginning playing catch-up. In early April President Ruutel opened a regional session of the Presidential Roundtable on National Minorities in

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northeast Estonia designed to bring parents and educators together to discuss the reform plan. And in May the Ministry of Education will host a seminar to present the results of a regional consultative process on reform implementation.

MIXED REVIEWS FROM STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

18. (SBU) We continue to hear mixed reviews about the pending reform from teachers and students (reftels). One Russian school geography teacher interviewed recently in the Estonian press said "it's one thing to speak Estonian, another to teach Russian students in it," but also noted that students can "always ask in Russian if confused." Teachers without the requisite knowledge of Estonian fear losing their jobs. To date teachers concerned about the reform have not been organized, or particularly vocal, in their opposition, though retired Biology and Geography teacher Nina Gavrilova spoke for the more strident end of her cohort when she told the press recently that "the silence of Russian teachers can be interpreted as the protest of 'the insulted and humiliated' against the destruction of Russian cultural intelligentsia." Common also is the view expressed by Civics teacher Vladimir Kalinkin, who said "instruction in a foreign [Estonian] language will limit students' knowledge by killing their interest in studies and worsening instruction quality." He claims that students "view the reform as infringement of human rights, assimilation, and, its end product, discrimination."

19. (U) Many Russian school students have in fact expressed negative views in the media about the coming reform. GOE officials tell us this reflects parroting of misinformation spread among teachers and parents, and say that more aggressive outreach of the kind recently

initiated will help address the problem. A recurring concern among students who have expressed opposition to the reform is that their grades will suffer because instruction in Estonian will make comprehension of the given subject more difficult. This in turn will be a form of discrimination against Russian-speaking students.

¶10. (U) Not all Russian-speaking students oppose the reform, however, and some groups are looking for more opportunities to learn Estonian. When Estonia's Language Immersion Center (which oversees Estonian immersion programs nationwide) was threatened with closure earlier in the year, the Student Representational Assembly (which includes representatives from over 50 Russian schools) protested strongly. The Director of the Open Republic (OP) youth organization, which supports the reform, told us recently that students in northeast Estonia are generally positive towards the reform, though he acknowledged that many simply hope it will not affect them.

The Political Angle on the Reform

¶11. (SBU) With Estonian parliamentary elections less than a year away, the educational reform is almost certain to become politicized. Criticism of the Ministry of Education by MPA advisor Veedla, who like his Minister is from the Reform Party, is undoubtedly in part motivated by the fact that the MOE is in the hands of a Minister from the Center Party. The chance to tweak a party that has been the traditional beneficiary of Estonia's Russian-speaking vote will be hard to resist. Already Reform Party MP Sergei Ivanov has weighed in on the subject in the press, as has People's Union MP Rodion Denisov who suggests that the only possible way to solve the situation is to start looking for alternative methods -- including development of private schools -- of providing quality education in one's mother tongue.

¶12. (SBU) Estonia's mainstream political parties will be somewhat constrained in the debate for fear of offending either one or the other of the ethnic Estonian and Russian-speaking constituencies. This is not the case for Estonia's Russian-speaking parties. Never particularly successful in Estonia, these parties can be expected to work the issue for maximum gain. The Constitutional Party's recently-elected Chair Andrei Zarenkov told us the education reform is one of the

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party's top priorities. Zarenkov, who in his short tenure has shown that he's not afraid to court controversy, says the school reform will fail conceptually -- in part because educational quality cannot be maintained -- but then be imposed anyway. This will provoke a backlash among Russian-speakers, he predicts.

¶13. (SBU) For its part the Russian Party of Estonia tried to make an issue of the reform during 2005 municipal elections. Having largely failed, it is now beginning a campaign to achieve "cultural autonomy" for Estonia's Russian-speakers, a legal status under Estonian law that gives certain rights to minority groups to form institutions for "cultural self-government."

¶14. (SBU) Comment: While it appears the GOE was slow off-the-mark in preparing the upcoming reform, a bit of urgency has been injected into the process in recent months. Teacher training, further development of

material and an awareness campaign will all be critical to ensure a smooth start to the transition in 2007. But regardless of how preparations proceed, we can expect loud criticism from some quarters -- both domestically and internationally -- as the reform proceeds. The issue is too tempting for some constituencies to let pass. However, given the gradual nature of the transition, and the fact that Russian-speaking parents genuinely want their children to have a better knowledge of Estonian (immersion programs are routinely over-subscribed), large-scale street protests of the kind we saw in Latvia are unlikely here.

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